

The Seriously Depleted Cowhorn Orchid,
Cyrtopodium punctatum, Endangered in Florida

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Florida is home for several native species of orchids (2, 4). Among these is a rather spectacular species, Cyrtopodium punctatum (L.) Lindley, variously known as cowhorn orchid or cigar orchid because of the shape of the pseudobulbs (swollen stems). It has also been called bee-swarm orchid because of the fancied resemblance of the inflorescence to a swarm of bees suspended in air.

Cyrtopodium punctatum occurs from extreme South Florida through the Caribbean Islands and southern Mexico into central South America. It at one time was rather abundant in the Everglades and Big Cypress swamps, but because of excessive collecting, is now nearly impossible to find there.



Fig. 1. Flowering C. punctatum
growing in cypress stump.



Fig. 2. Closeup of flowers of
C. punctatum.

Description: Large, epiphytic, up to 1 m tall; roots numerous, white, with erect, aerial branches; pseudobulbs from a short, thick rhizome, erect, solid, fusiform to 30 cm long x 5 cm thick, ringed, sheathed with leaves when young, with scarious sheaths, or bare when old; leaves up to about 12 per pseudobulb, linear, distichous, green, plicate, up to 70 x 5 cm; inflorescence a stout, lateral stalk from base of pseudobulb, several-branched near top, many-flowered with often 30-40 widely spreading, showy flowers; flowers March to May, 3.5 cm across, sepals greenish yellow with purplish brown spots, petals wavy, yellow, spotted with madder-brown, lip 3-lobed, brownish, yellow at base; capsules usually few, 8 cm long, 3-5 cm broad (1, 2, 3, 4).

Discussion: The earliest recorded collection of *C. punctatum* in Florida was by A. P. Garber in 1877 near Miami. At that time and for 50 years or more thereafter, it was quite common in the scrub cypress areas of the Everglades and Big Cypress swamps. Collectors have since devastated these populations. According to Luer (4) "It is certainly one of our most spectacular native orchids. Because it has such great appeal, it has been intensively sought and unmercifully hauled out of the forests of southern Florida. Two generations ago it was quite abundant in the open, sunlit cypress stands of the Big Cypress Swamp. Immense plants weighing hundreds of pounds existed. Old accounts relate that wagon-load upon wagon-load of the largest plants were carted out. Since then, the smaller ones have disappeared too. Today these beautiful plants can be found only in the inaccessible areas of the most remote swamps, but these, too, are gradually falling victim to thoughtless collectors." With these plants becoming ever more scarce, collectors are now removing them from remote areas of Everglades National Park. All such collection is illegal, but enforcement is very difficult.

The cowhorn orchid sometimes grows as a terrestrial plant in parts of its range, but it grows primarily as an epiphyte in Florida. In cultivation it is grown solely as an epiphyte. It has a more massive root system than most other epiphytes and requires a large pot or support. A cypress plaque with chunks of osmunda fiber is satisfactory for growing this plant. It requires a well drained and aerated medium (2). Bush and Morton (1) report "Some orchid growers say that the life of this orchid under home conditions is only about seven years after maturity."

Many plants are grown the way they come from the woods. The tree on which the plant grows is sawed off above and below the plant, and the section of trunk with the plant is moved to the greenhouse. Figure 1 shows such a plant growing in a section of cypress stump placed in a suitable site for photographing.

Florida law (Section 581.185, Florida Statutes) prohibits removal of this or any other endangered plant from the wild without both written permission of the land owner or custodian and a collecting permit issued by the Division of Plant Industry. Federal law also prohibits removal of any plants from Everglades National Park. Nursery propagation is the only satisfactory way to fill the demand for this attractive orchid.

Survey and Detection: Those persons involved in checking compliance with the law (Section 581.185) should monitor nurseries, flea markets, roadside markets, etc., for orchids having spindle- or cigar-shaped pseudobulbs with rings their entire length, growing in or on recently cut tree trunk or stump sections, or otherwise appearing to have been pulled recently from a tree. If a suspected violation is found, proof of origin or proper collecting permit should be requested. Positive identification is needed before final action can be taken.

LITERATURE CITED

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